

# Challenges & Solutions

Vol. 1, No. 1  
December 2003

STRATEGIES FOR PROMOTING CHILD SAFETY, PERMANENCY, AND WELL-BEING IN NYS

## Welcome from the Commissioner . . .

I am pleased to present the first issue of our new *Challenges & Solutions* newsletter, a newsletter highlighting strategies to enhance safety, permanency, and well-being for all New York's children. Through this quarterly electronic newsletter we will share with stakeholders in the child welfare system the solutions that address the challenges as we continue to implement our child welfare improvement agenda in New York State. We will report on current activities and innovative practices taking place across the state.

In these difficult financial times we must continue to find ways to improve the lives of the children, youth, and families we serve. Whether we are preventing foster care placement through creative in-home service delivery, reunifying children with their families after temporary placement, or finding adoptive homes more quickly than in the past for children who cannot safely return to their birth families, we must work better and smarter.

Strengthening partnerships, collaborating across systems, and increasing family engagement are key to our success. I look forward to continuing this work with you — our partners — in these efforts.

**John A. Johnson**  
**Commissioner**  
**NYS Office of**  
**Children & Family Services**

## Overview

### Child & Family Service Review in New York State

*In 2001, the federal Administration for Children and Families (ACF) conducted the Child and Family Service Review (CFSR) of New York State's child welfare practices and programs. ACF's final report presented the findings, including areas in need of improvement. The result was the Program Improvement Plan, commonly known as the PIP.*

The PIP is both a response by the NYS Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) to the federal review and a blueprint for future action. As a response, it addresses the review findings with specific references to the CFSR national standards, the state's anticipated level of progress in meeting those standards, and methods of measuring performance. As a blueprint, it sets forth 12 targeted strategies and action steps to achieve ongoing quality improvement in the state's child welfare practices, services, and outcomes.

#### Who created the plan?

The Office of Children and Family Services views the PIP as an opportunity to partner with others to foster creative thinking about performance in child welfare. Joining with the 58 local departments of social services ("districts"), New York City's Administration for Children's Services, voluntary agencies, the federally recognized tribes, and other child welfare stakeholders, OCFS developed an inclusive approach to formulating the PIP.

Three tiers of teams developed the plan: the Management Team; the Design and Implementation Team, the principal architect of the PIP; and the Design and Implementation Workgroups.

#### How it works

While seeking to address the broader underlying issues contributing to performance, the PIP maintains a clear focus on improving child safety, permanency, and well-being. Each of the 12 strategies addresses more than one review item, national standard, or systemic factor noted in the federal review. Within each core strategy is a series of action steps designed to achieve the intended impact of the strategy. See page 4 for a list of the strategies and strategy coordinators. ♦

*Photo courtesy of OCFS 2002-03 Foster/Adoptive Parent Recruitment Campaign*



# Strengthening an Effective Partnership Family Court and Child Welfare

*Collaboration among the courts, social services agencies, and the larger community is crucial to achieving the goal of timely, appropriate decisions that lead to permanent family connections. The Office of Children and Family Services (OCFS) and the Office of Court Administration (OCA) are working together toward this shared goal.*

Through increased contact, sharing information, acquiring relevant data, and training, representatives of child welfare and the courts are coming together to address barriers to permanency.

To begin the process, earlier this year OCFS convened a Statewide Team of organizations and individuals integrally involved in child welfare issues. The team is composed of staff from OCFS, OCA, the Permanent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children, and other relevant state agencies, as well as an administrative judge, family court judges, and representatives from local districts, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), county "best practice" family courts, law guardians, and attorneys. The team serves as a vehicle for improving communication, expanding and developing new strategies, identifying needed data, and overseeing the joint effort. Subcommittees include: juvenile justice, model programs, technology, training, and federal issues.

Most recently, the historic seminar, *Sharing Success: Exploring the Interface Between Family Court and Child Welfare*, provided a valuable opportunity for interested representatives to come together in one place and share information. Sponsored by OCFS and the Permanent Judicial Commission on Justice for Children in partnership with the National Council of Juvenile and Family Court Judges, the seminar was held on September 9-10 at the Desmond in Albany.

Opening remarks by Chief Judge Judith Kaye and OCFS Commissioner John Johnson set the vision for the seminar. Presentations addressed strategies to improve permanency for adolescents, engage families in the court process, and reduce length of stay and re-entry. For example, in a panel on teamwork, which discussed the benefits of case conferencing in child protective proceedings, Hon. Carol Stokinger (Bronx County Family Court) noted a "big improvement on how

## Questions To Help Identify Permanency Delays

(From a set of questions distributed to participants at the *Sharing Success* training seminar. For a complete copy, contact a Strategy Coordinator for Strategy #11 (see page 4 for contact information).)

Listed below are questions that courts and agencies may find helpful in determining the causes of delays in family reunification and adoption. Many of these questions might prove useful as local districts and courts in New York work together to define collaborative projects that will expedite permanency. In addition, the questions should help focus baseline and ongoing quality assurance initiatives that will support the projects.

Some of the issues listed below apply to specific stages of the legal process, while others, referred to as "dimensions," can apply to multiple stages of the process.

...

How well do the early stages of the court process (emergency removal, pretrial, and Article 10 proceedings) move cases toward timely and final decisions for children?

- Is agency documentation of reasonable efforts/best interests of the child sufficient to allow the court to make appropriate findings in emergency removals?
- Are there early paternity determinations?
- Is there early notice and location of fathers?
- Is there early notice and location of other relatives?
- Is documentation of abuse or maltreatment precise and complete?
- Are petitions precise, complete, and compelling?
- Are there allegations against each parent?
- Is testimony on behalf of the agency effective?
- Is the Article 10 proceeding completed within a reasonable time — e.g., within 60 days after the child is removed from home?
- Does the court make detailed, complete, and accurate judicial findings describing abuse or maltreatment by parents?



we've done things in the past." The consensus was that case conferencing moves cases forward, helping to focus attention on families.

Just as important, most counties sent two people from the social services district and two people representing the family court (with 34 family court judges attending) — each group of four forming a "seed group." Taking with them lessons gained from the seminar, the seed groups will continue communicating and working together locally on an ongoing basis.

Recently established is a joint website to support communication among the stakeholders. Best practices, resources, newsletters, notices of events, and sample forms used by districts will be available. The website, completed this fall, will be available on the Internet so that the public can learn about current and planned activities. The website address is [www.ocfs.state.ny.us](http://www.ocfs.state.ny.us), and click on Statewide Team. ♦



## What do Foster Parents Need?

Supporting the role of foster parents in promoting safety, permanency, and well-being is one of the eight areas that falls under Strategy #1, Support for Strengths Based, Family Focused Practice. Realizing that the effective role of foster parents is key to such support, OCFS developed action steps to address reasons for moves, casework contacts, and needs of foster parents for training and other support.

One of the first steps was to develop surveys for the Foster Parent Training and Support Assessment activity. The first survey, sent to 1,740 foster parents, asked them how they see their role, if they know their legal rights, if they get support from their agency, and what kinds of services and supports they need. The second survey, sent to all districts and 118 voluntary agencies, asked caseworkers how they see the foster parent role and what kind of information and support they and their agency provide. More surveys will be distributed at trainings and conferences during the fall.

The plan of the workgroup, formed to guide this process, is to distribute the findings early in 2004 and recommend ways to help foster parents access needed services and

advocate for their own needs. The group includes members from OCFS, NYC Administration for Children's Services (ACS), St. Lawrence County, Northeast Parent and Child, Program Development Program (PDP), Center for Development of Human Services (CDHS), a foster parent, and NYS Citizens' Coalition for Children.

Developing and distributing a New York State Foster Parent Manual was also a priority during the past year. The manual presents useful information reflecting current policy, regulations, and practices in foster care. It includes guidance on issues like discipline, health care, working as a team with birth parents and caseworkers, and day-to-day life with foster children.

OCFS distributed 7,500 printed copies of the manual, along with a disk for printing more copies, to local districts and voluntary agencies through the regional offices. Feedback from foster parents, obtained from a telephone survey of 10 districts and 15 voluntary agencies has been very positive. Comments include: "It's a wonderful reference, love the format, useful, helpful, and easy to follow." For a copy, go to [www.ocfs.state.ny.us](http://www.ocfs.state.ny.us). The updated December 2003 edition will be available in mid-January. ♦

## Listening to Youth

***"You can get involved. You can be empowered. Be responsible in seeking out connections. Get to know your foster parents."*** These are just a few of the tips being given by older youth in foster care to teens coming into care for the first time. Stressing the idea that children in foster care need to take an active role in their own situation, youth leaders themselves are demonstrating how to be active, involved, and empowered.

OCFS has been offering Youth Speak Outs for 13 years. This year was different. The Speak Out was

preceded by a Youth Summit, held for the first time to bring together 25 youth in a Foster Care Youth Leadership Advisory Team (FCYLAT). Composed of youth identified as having potential leadership qualities, the team will provide a structure for following up on the issues and concerns raised in Youth Speak Outs.

The team gives OCFS an opportunity to develop an ongoing partnership with youth in foster care. The youth, ages 14-21, come from

continued on page 4 . . .

## Local solutions

### Erie County Breaks Through

*What can you do by Tuesday?  
Never plan more than you can do.  
Consensus is not needed.  
Steal ideas shamelessly.*

Sound different? That's because the Breakthrough Series Collaborative approach is different. In contrast to the usual planning done by public agencies, which takes a long time to complete and implement, this approach allows ideas to be tested quickly. Initiated by The Casey Family Programs National Center for Resource Family Support, the collaborative encourages selected public child welfare agencies to test small, rapid changes to produce breakthrough results in their recruitment and retention of resource families. The effort is primarily voluntary, with consultant advice and travel costs paid for by the program.

The Erie County Department of Social Services was one of only 25 agencies in the nation selected to participate in the collaborative. The county's goal is to recruit and retain foster and adoptive homes for African-American, urban youth between the ages of 10 and 18 years old.

Each selected agency put together a team to make changes; teams are guided and mentored by experts in the field. In Erie County, the local Core Team, led by Joseph Gabryel, Homefinding Unit supervisor, includes two caseworkers, a foster parent, and two youth living in foster care. The Extended Team, a group of 25 committed volunteers from the community, including foster parents, court, and county and voluntary agencies, supports the effort.

According to Sue Badeau, Casey Family Programs, Erie County's is one of the outstanding teams in terms of working directly with youth: "By including youth at the fundamental level of decision making and process, where youth actually design recruitment/retention projects, they are a national leader." The Breakthrough Series Collaborative, she says, is an exciting process that leads to real change and differences in outcomes for children and families. "It's a

continued on page 4 . . .

# Strategy Coordinators . . .

*Who they are and how to contact them.*

*The 12 strategies adopted by OCFS to improve child safety, permanency and well-being, and seven specific areas under strategy #1, are listed below along with the coordinator for each strategy.*

## 1 Support for Strengths Based, Family Focused Practice

- Enhancing initial engagement and assessment for families reported to the State Central Register to reduce repeat incidents of maltreatment  
Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373, Catherine Grose (518) 474-9584
- Family conferencing and early engagement  
Linda Kurtz (585) 238-8200
- Strengthening case planning and Service Plan Review processes  
Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373
- Strengthening family visitation (with parents and siblings in care)  
Linda Kurtz (585) 238-8200
- Promoting placement stability and child well-being through improved assessments of children's behavioral and mental health needs  
Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373; Mimi Weber (518) 486-1106
- Supporting the role of foster parents in promoting safety, permanency, and well-being  
Renee Hallock (518) 474-4726
- Enhancing quality assurance and continuous improvements in practice  
Gail Haulenbeek (518) 474-9879

## 2 Concurrent Planning Implementation

Jack Klump (315) 423-1200; Michelle Rafael (518) 402-6546

## 3 Safety and Well-Being of Children in Congregate Care

Patricia Sheehy (914) 377-2080; Shelley Murphy (518) 402-6546

## 4 Permanency Options: Mediation

Michelle Rafael (518) 402-6546

## 5 Adolescent Services and Outcomes

Linda Brown (716) 847-3145; Diana Fenton (518) 474-0014

## 6 Development and Piloting of a Differentiated Protective Services Response to Allegations of Child Maltreatment

Jamie Greenberg (518) 473-1327

## 7 Workforce Development: Staff Recruitment, Retention and Development

Gail Haulenbeek (518) 474-9879; Peter Miraglia (518) 474-9645  
Margo Velez-Lemmerman (518) 474-2960

## 8 Workload Management Support

William McLaughlin (518) 486-7078

## 9 Improving the Statewide Information Systems

Karen Vergoni (518) 474-7087; Donna Keys (518) 574-6791

## 10 Tribal Consultation

Christine Heywood (518) 474-9465; Kim Thomas (716) 847-3123

## 11 Improve Relationships and Interface between the Family Court and the Child Welfare System

Gail Gordon (518) 473-8418; Maryjane Link (716) 847-3743  
Kathleen DeCataldo (518) 473-9551; Cheryl Larrier (212) 383-1805

## 12 Improve Cross-systems Collaboration and Increase Service Array and Access

Dianne Ewashko (518) 473-7373; Larry Pasti (518) 561-8740

E-mail addresses for coordinators consist of the  
firstname.lastname@dfa.state.ny.us  
(as in jane.doe@dfa.state.ny.us).

## Listening from page 3

locations across the state from Long Island to Buffalo.

Formed to provide a consistent, ongoing voice for youth, the team will:

- Advise, assist, and connect with other youth in care.
- Speak out to educate government, the general public, caregivers, and peers.
- Promote positive changes in the system while working with OCFS.
- Provide leadership development for the youth participants.

The First Annual Foster Care Youth Leadership Summit was held at Herkimer County Community College on August 18-19. Members of the FCYLAT and their adult mentors (caseworkers, foster parents) gather-

ed for two days of youth leadership training and team building activities. In their first project, participants worked in small groups to give feedback on a statewide handbook for youth in foster care. The team met on November 11 in Albany.

More than 400 youth and adults from 31 counties attended the Youth Speak Out on August 20. Speak Outs were also held in the summer and fall at Stonybook University, Hunter College, and Buffalo State College. For more information on the FCYLAT and the Speak Outs, contact William McLaughlin, Albany Regional Office, (518) 486-7078; william.mclaughlin@dfa.state.ny.us. ♦

## Erie County from page 3

wonderful opportunity for New York State that Erie County was selected since they can share what they're learning throughout the state."

Some of the ideas being tested in Erie County include low-cost business cards with contact information; foster parent community forums; Powerpoint presentation; contacting new certified families if no first placement within six months; exit interview with resource families who recently left the program; bring-a-friend to the information meeting; support groups for resource parents after in-service trainings; support groups by ethnicity; and comprehensive calendar of events.

Plans are to expand the project beyond Buffalo to the rest of the county and to continue the collaborative teamwork beyond the one-year-project. For more information on the Erie County recruitment and retention collaborative, contact Joe Gabryel, (716) 858-7312; joseph.gabryel@dfa.state.ny.us. ♦